

Rise Up!  
Acts 1:1-11  
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Did you know that today is one of the most important Sundays in the church? In fact, you could argue that what this Sunday represents is almost as important as some of the other Christian holidays. Culturally, it doesn't have the commercial appeal of Christmas or the heart-overflowing joy of Easter, but in the grand scheme of God's work in this world, what we observe on this Sunday is just as important. This is Ascension Sunday.

Ascension Sunday falls six weeks after Easter and one week before Pentecost, which is next week. As we prepare for that story about the outpouring of God's Spirit on the Disciples, we have to first finish up the loose ends in Jesus' story, namely that fact that he's been resurrected and is walking around making appearances. Now what? Is he just going to keep doing this forever? Two thousand years after the first Easter would Jesus still be walking the earth, popping up here and there? "Honey, set an extra plate, I invited Resurrected Jesus over for dinner tonight." Of course not! So we have this story at the beginning of Acts about Jesus' ascension, which sets the stage for the disciples to take up the torch and continue God's work.

I think I know why we don't really celebrate Ascension Sunday. We don't put up Ascension trees or prepare for a big Ascension dinner with all the fixin's. That's because what is acknowledged on Ascension Sunday is that fact that Jesus left us, it's the day the present Lord became absent. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Do we really need a day commemorating Christ's absence from us? We get too many reminders of that on regular days, that God doesn't always feel as close to us as we would like.

And yet, celebrating the Lord's absence is just one of the many paradoxes about Christianity. A paradox is defined as "a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth." That pretty much sums up our entire belief system. Think how absurd this gathering must look to outsiders. We come together week after week with no intention of doing anything productive. The main guy puts on a dress, we sit and face a huge instrument of torture, we close our eyes and talk as if there's someone there. We declare things we cannot prove to a God we cannot see. And then we drink coffee and eat sweets. Does that sound a bit absurd?

But remember the other part of the definition of paradox: "...but in reality expresses a possible truth." A possible truth. Can we say a definitive truth? Not definitively. Do we really know that we know that we know what we believe is true? No more so than I can show you a picture of what the wind looks like or describe what freedom feels like. But I believe what I know about God is true, and one of the reasons I believe that is because of what happens on Ascension Sunday.

As you may know, Acts is actually the second part of a two-part book, both written by Luke to his friend Theophilus. In the first book, the gospel of Luke, the author sets out to write an "orderly account" of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But the story doesn't end there. You can't stop at the end of Luke. That would be like stopping the story after Cinderella lost her slipper or after E.T's gray little body is found in that creek bed. There's more to the story. To fully grasp the story Luke is telling, you have to read Acts.

What Acts does, particularly these first 11 verses, is it completes Jesus' story and fulfills God's promises. It reminds us that what God begins, God completes. What God promises, God

fulfills. This episode brings closure to the story of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, and prepares the way for the fulfilling of the next promise. Jesus says in John's gospel, "If you love me you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth." That's what happens on Pentecost, which is what we celebrate next Sunday. The Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost – these are all evidence that God does what God promises, and as I said last week, it is in that truth that we put our hope as believers.

So where does that leave those of us who are left behind? In a sense, every since the Ascension we've been looking up, waiting for a glimpse of God, waiting for Jesus to return and set things right. We're living in what theologian Karl Barth called "the significant pause," the time in between Jesus' first and second coming, the time where we wait with expectant hope for God to do what God has promised. As one preacher said, the disciples are now "on the clock."

It would be a lot easier if Jesus were still here, wouldn't it? I can't even imagine how the disciples felt, watching their leader leave them. Who wouldn't be gazing up after that? I imagine they probably would have stood there for days, necks craned, eyes toward the heavens, hoping that Jesus would float back down and say, "Just kidding! Let's go get some fish." Now what?

Now what, indeed. I've heard that question asked many times. Now what? The person I thought would always be around is no longer around. Now what? That security I thought I would always have is gone. Now what? The child I thought would always need me is off on their own. Now what?

Leigh and I are experiencing that. It's hard to believe, but on Wednesday of this last week, our youngest daughter graduated. Granted, it was from preschool, but that doesn't make the reality of it any less painful. She even got a little diploma. And her preschool teacher said to all of us parents what we know in our hearts to be true: "Life is a series of little letting-gos." Parents certainly know that. But so do kids. Just watch any child's reaction when the balloon they thought was tied securely to their wrist slips free, ascending into the clouds. Now what?

God heard the disciples' hearts crying out that question, because God provides an answer in the form of two men dressed in white, who offer a gentle reproof: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?" In other words, Don't just stand there; do something!" Jesus spent three years doing ministry among these disciples, teaching them and listening to them and forgiving them and empowering them. He has been preparing them for this moment, when the reins of this fledgling religious group would be handed over to them. It's time to stop looking up and start looking around. As I heard one pastor say it, "Don't look for Jesus in the heights; look for him in the depths." The depths of human life, the deep, dark places in the world, that's where the disciples will now find him.

So as we sit here this morning, experiencing our Sunday worship, I wonder if we are guilty of the same neck-craning as the disciples. Are we sitting here looking up, waiting for a glimpse of Jesus, putting God's work on hold until we get some sort of confirmation that this paradox of Christianity is more than just a possible truth? Are we hoping to experience a presence that would make sense of the feelings of absence, a definitive, incontrovertible truth to counteract the absurdity of life?

It could be. And that's OK. I believe all of us go through times when that's all we have to offer, simple to be here. But the reality of life is that there will be times when Christ feels absent, when we live in the "significant pause" between Christ's presence here on earth. And if we only spend our time looking up, I think we've lost the plot. We don't have the benefit of three years of teaching from Jesus, but we have something else. We have this church. We have God's word. We

have the bread and the cup. We have each other. This is our training ground, where we can hear about and practice grace and forgiveness and loving each other, so that we can take those things into the world. But if the extent of our faith – our scripture reading, our praying, our working for justice and equality, our reaching into the depths of the world – if all of that starts and ends here, we're just looking up.

I believe we are called to come here and look up so that we can go out there and look around. We come here each week to listen and to sing and to taste, to be reminded of who we are and who we're called to be so we can go out and live that call. We come here to pray so we can go out there and witness. There's nothing wrong with looking up, with seeking God's face and awaiting with hope Christ's return. But if we only look up, if we don't then live out what we believe is true, we're missing the presence of Christ in our midst.

Remember I said that this is a two-part story, Luke and Acts? That's not entirely true. It's really a three-part story. There's Luke and Acts...and us. We are now on the clock, called to take the work that Jesus began and continue it, no matter how imperfectly. The answer to "now what" is the church, reaching out to comfort the afflicted, to be a companion to the lonely, to confront evil, to speak a word of truth. I like what pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says about this story. She says, "It's almost as if he had not ascended but exploded, so that all of the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, so that the seeds of heaven were sown over the fields of the earth." Each one of us can do that, taking the work of Christ and multiplying it exponentially.

I think I have a better understanding of why Ascension Sunday is not really given a lot of attention. In this sermon alone, I've compared Jesus to a Disney princess, an extraterrestrial, and a balloon. There just aren't any good Ascension metaphors. "Jesus, I need a picture. I need a comparison. I need a reminder down here on earth of what you are like so I can tell others about you." (Look around) Oh, yeah. I see Jesus now. He's right here. Now what? Don't just sit there; do something.